

The Bird Farm's Strange Story

Funding for this research project was provided by Commissioner Kathie Gannon

Remnants of one of DeKalb's largest antebellum farms and most tragic stories still survive in Panthersville on River Road. John Bird was one of the most prosperous farmers in the county until an inconceivable event caused him to lose almost everything. Born in Edgefield County, South Carolina around 1789, he came to DeKalb County in the 1830s with his wife and children and began building his large farm on the South River. He started purchasing land along the South River in 1835 and by 1840 had acquired 1,200 acres; one of the largest farms in DeKalb County.

The Bird Farm had 11 slaves in the 1840 Federal Census. That number grew to 43 by the 1850 Census; possibly the most slaves owned in DeKalb County at the time. In comparison, fellow South River farmer and land

owner George Lyon had 17 slaves counted in the 1850 Census. DeKalb County, located in Georgia's Upper Piedmont, has a hilly terrain with a shorter growing season that does not lend itself to cotton growing and, therefore, never developed large plantations. Most DeKalb County farmers had a relatively small amount of acreage and farmed the land themselves, and John Bird was one of the very few in DeKalb at the time to be considered a planter.

Because the terrain along the South River is fertile but somewhat rugged, farmers improved small fields throughout their land and used techniques like terracing in their farming practice. Terracing was a common practice for farmers of the Southern Piedmont before and after the Civil War, because it allowed them to farm the rugged landscape of the Georgia Upcountry while controlling erosion. There is evidence that terracing was implemented more than once at the John Bird Farm although when the



Bird Home on River Road, DeKalb County (from our Archives).

Northwoods National Register Nomination

By Claudia Stucke

True to its mission to preserve the county's history, the DeKalb History Center recently funded the research for Doraville's Northwoods community's application for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. A team of Georgia State University graduate students, under the direction of history professor Richard Laub, gathered information and prepared the application for Northwoods' designation as a historic community. Melissa Forgey and Leslie Borger represented the DHC at the requisite community meetings and made DHC's resources available to the researchers undertaking this challenging task.

The National Register of Historic Places has documented the history of countless architectural treasures, from Independence Hall in Philadelphia to DeKalb's own Mary Gay and Swanton Houses. But a collection of 1950s

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Athos Menaboni Mural

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Our beautiful Menaboni mural has just been placed on loan to Brick Store Pub. With your first glance at this striking piece, one important detail may be lost as you admire this 27 foot wide piece. This large piece includes 15 mosaic panels created from about 3,000 eggshells! Mills B. Lane, Jr., then president of The Citizens and Southern Bank, commissioned Athos Menaboni to create this piece for the lobby of the C&S Emory branch (1237 Clairmont Road) in 1958. The mosaic is divided into three pictorial panels with two title panels of Japanese Nakora wood creating a triptych. The title panels read, "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

The piece is on loan to the Brick Store Pub for at least five years, and we are grateful to the owners for providing such a prominent spot to display this unique painting. We worked closely with Dave Blanchard, Mike Gallagher and Tom Moore to create a very secure method to display and protect the mural. Carpenters Volkmar Wochatz and Rahim Carlock created the framing system with guidance and additional talent provided by our own Exhibits Coordinator, Karen Chance.

The new installation was unveiled on June 24, complete with a fundraiser hosted by the Brick Store Pub as part of their 15th anniversary celebration. We are thrilled with this partnership and hope the Menoboni is enjoyed by the public for many years to come.

Born in Italy in 1895, Menaboni became a well-known artist in Georgia from the 1930s on. Between 1951 and 1969, he was commissioned by Mills Lane to paint murals in various C&S banks. Menaboni is often hailed as the heir of James Audubon and painted over 150 species of birds, eventually publishing *Menaboni's Birds*, in 1950. He also rendered countless landscapes, seascapes, botanicals, fantasies, and nature studies on a variety of media including glass, silk, wood, Masonite, cork and paper.

Thanks to Russ Clayton for expanding on the biographical information and **Shawn Vinson of VINSONart.com** for providing these photos from the installation.

To see the completed piece, pop into Brick Store Pub at 125 E. Court Square, Decatur and tell 'em the History Center sent you! ✦



Exhibits: Guy Hayes and Scottdale Mills

HIGHLIGHTS: One of the most extensive and unique resources in the archives of the DeKalb History Center is the image collection of Avondale photographer Guy Hayes. From 1944 to 1983, Hayes contributed extensively to newspapers such as the Atlanta Journal/Constitution and the DeKalb News/Sun, producing many thousands of film negatives. His work covered a broad range of subject matter, including domestic life, politics, recreation, disasters, community growth, sports, animals and much more.

Unfortunately, very little documentation accompanied the donation beyond bare bones descriptions scrawled on negative sleeves - often no more than a place name, a year, and his initials. Despite this, Hayes' photographs remain vibrant and often easily relatable vignettes of American life at mid-century.

Hayes' wife, Dottie (Merritt) was a volunteer at the DeKalb History Center, which helped influence his decision to leave his life's work in the organization's care. The DHC took possession of the Guy Hayes collection in 1984; but due to limited resources and the extensive scope of the project, it remained largely untouched until 2010. A grant from the **Decatur Craft Beer Festival** helped us to purchase a scanner and get this enormous project underway. Since then, the negatives have been rehoused in acid-free sleeves, and over 12,000 have been scanned; it is estimated that at least 3000 remain.

In May of 2012, a new exhibit was opened to visitors of the DHC: "Highlights from the Guy Hayes Collection: Food, Fashion & Fun in the Modern Era." These were themes that suggested themselves through an exhaustive, image-by-image examination of the existing scans, considering the strength of the photographs from both a historic and an artistic perspective. In anticipation of this exhibit, the galleries were freshly painted utilizing bright accent colors that were popular in the 50s, 60s and 70s. This will be the first in an ongoing series of thematic exhibitions showcasing photographs from the Guy Hayes collection, a resource we are very fortunate and proud to possess. The photos to the right are examples we selected to exhibit, but they did not make the final cut.

SCOTTDALE MILLS: April 2012 marked the 30th anniversary of the closing of Scottdale Mills. The original mill - a huge, red brick, industrial building with a crenulated tower at its center - was opened by George Washington Scott in 1901. Scottdale manufactured goods "for the rubber and bag trades" and later produced machine belting, laundry bags and heavy cotton twine. The mill employed local residents and created a community for their workers. Employees rented houses from the Mill and could purchase provisions at the company store. This village type of arrangement kept families loyal, close to the mill and together as a unit.

Various economic pressures caused Scottdale Mills to close in 1982. Recession and inexpensive foreign imports caused a loss of textile jobs all over the southeast through the 1970s and 1980s. The original Scottdale Mills building was sold and demolished. *Scottdale Mills: 1901-1982*, includes tools and artifacts from the mill, fabric sample books, the first employee ledger, and dramatic enlargements of historical photos, offering insight into a DeKalb way of life that has vanished. ✦



Northwoods National

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and '60s subdivisions? Seeing Eisenhower- and Kennedy-era split-levels and ranch-style homes—even if dubbed “Mid-Century Modern”—on the National Register may seem like seeing Bakelite or Fiestaware displayed alongside Wedgwood in a fine antiques shop. Yet there they are, the Fiestaware in the antiques shop and, we hope, the split-level houses on the NRHP, and for good reason.

Perhaps the familiar does not inspire as much appreciation as the ancient or the exotic. Many of us grew up in the typical three-bedroom, one-bath ranch house of the 'fifties and 'sixties; and as adults we may have aspired to something grander, regarding that staple of mid-century architecture as outmoded. (Never mind that many of us moved into Craftsman-style bungalows that the previous generation had considered just as passé.) Does the popularity of *Mad Men*, Danish Modern furniture, and retro fashion mean that 'sixties architecture is also suddenly “in”? Does mere age make an antique, and does nostalgia make the commonplace valuable or even historic?

To consider this question in context, let's look back at DeKalb County sixty years ago, just a few years after World War II ended. As young men and women came home from the war, they generally did not return to the dairy farms of their parents and grandparents but rather resumed or started their own family lives in the Atlanta suburb of Decatur and other small towns in DeKalb. At the same time, businesses and individuals were attracted to the region by its relatively low cost of living, mild climate, and commercial opportunities. Almost overnight, it seemed, pastures became subdivisions; and farmhouses and barns were replaced by neat rows of red-brick, one-story houses. DeKalb's population soared from 86,942 in 1940 to 415,387 in 1970, keeping builders and developers busy with the demand for new housing. These postwar families helped produce the Baby Boom generation, requiring not only additional housing but also more schools, libraries, places of worship, and all the other

amenities necessary for a thriving community.

Much of this transformation occurred during the memorable tenure of Commissioner Scott Candler, who helped shepherd the county through this historic period and has been credited with attracting commercially successful businesses to the area. One of the largest was General Motors, which built its Doraville facility in 1947, producing hundreds of jobs as well as the need for conveniently located housing for its employees. The Doraville community, which had struggled through the Depression, now rebounded, reflecting the nationwide phenomenon of postwar prosperity.

The Planned Urban Development (PUD) of Northwoods was born of this period of robust growth, receiving approval for its Unit 1, Gordon Hills subdivision, in 1948, just one year after the opening of the GM Doraville plant. Developer Walter Tally chose the simple, form-meets-function ranch-style home as the staple for the community of homes. Not only was the design economical for the construction company, J. A. Jones Construction, to build, but its practical layout was ideally suited to the needs of Baby Boom families.

When it was discovered that initial designs were too plain to appeal to his target market, Tally hired two recent Georgia Tech graduate architects, Ernest Mastin and John Summer, to revise the common book plans by giving them more distinctive styles. Using elements of Joseph Eichler's Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired designs, Mastin and Summer energized, updated and contemporized the basic ranch design. Evidence of these architectural details can be seen in the variations of size and type of windows, basic “footprint” of the house (for instance, L-shape rather than strictly horizontal), variations in percentage of brick and siding, as well as other features. After 1953, and as other subdivisions (Sequoyah Woods and Fleetwood Hills) were added to the Northwoods community, fewer of the Plain Style ranch

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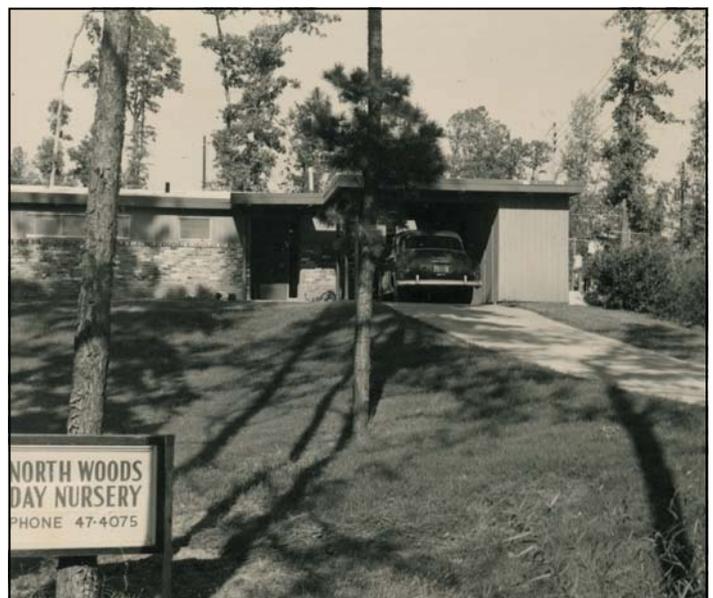
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Northwoods houses were advertised in local newspapers.



Clower's Nursery, from a Doraville Library album, ca. 1954.

Register Nomination (cont.)

houses and more Contemporary Style houses were built in response to changes in public tastes and needs. In particular, more split-level houses emerged, a style that increased steadily in popularity from the late 1950s through the early to mid-1960s.

A thriving community in the 1960s, Northwoods was not merely a collection of contiguous subdivisions; it boasted six Protestant churches, an elementary school, a high school, and two parks. The GM plant has ceased operation; but the historic autoworkers' Union Hall still stands, unoccupied, nearby on Buford Highway. Although Architect Phillip Windsor's design does not reflect any particular architectural style or type, the Union Hall has survived essentially unchanged since its construction in 1956; and its historic significance does not depend solely upon its architectural design. However, most of the architecture of the church and school buildings, as well as that of the Northwoods Community itself, reflects the Mid-Century Modern aesthetic of streamlined functionality.

A 530-acre tract of land, most of which is in Doraville, has survived essentially intact since its design and construction beginning in the late 1940s. When it was new, it represented the growth and prosperity that followed a devastating economic disaster in the 1930s and global warfare in the 1940s. It reflected optimism about the future and a new beginning for DeKalb County. The humble ranch-style home and now-commonplace split-level home were then exciting and innovative. For a great number of DeKalb residents, electricity and indoor plumbing were themselves innovations of the postwar years. As we look back at old family photographs of farmland or the pages of *Vanishing DeKalb*, we see gingerbread-trimmed Victorian houses and open green fields and wonder how they could have been sacrificed to "progress." That Mid-Century Modern time capsule in northeast DeKalb, Northwoods, is vulnerable to the same forces that have obliterated other vital parts of our history.

Yet Northwoods is more than a mere time capsule; it is a living, functioning community. Moreover, it represents a different kind of progress—not just the tearing down of the old and building of the new, not bulldozing new expressway lanes or rezoning communities into oblivion. Whereas Northwoods was, in the 1950s and 1960s, like many other DeKalb County neighborhoods, "all white," the new Northwoods community reflects the enthusiasm with which DeKalb County has embraced its growing diversity. No longer the homogeneous enclave with segregated schools, Northwoods is home to people of Asian, African, and Latino descent, as well as European. This diverse community has come together as the Northwoods Area Neighborhood Association (NANA) in support of their community's nomination to the National Register, and the DeKalb History Center is proud to support the community in our common mission to preserve our history. ✦



Northwoods Area residents packed the public meeting!



Belaire Circle, 1957.



Belaire Circle today.

Help the Archives!

As occasionally happens in any archives, these photographs were found in our collection with very little information. The only names associated with these photos are: Gladys, Louella Russell, Curtis Jett, Linda E. Taylor or McKinley Weems. If you know the subjects or locations, please contact our archivist at sweetapple@dekalbhistory.org or 404-373-1088, extension 22.



The Bird Farm (cont.)

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terraces were built is unknown, and remnants of the terracing can be seen in Fork Creek Mountain Park on River Road. Another terraced area, within the circa 1850 boundaries of the Bird Farm, was documented by archaeologists from Georgia State University in 1974 but has since been developed for residential housing and any remains of the terraces have been destroyed.

In the 1850 Agricultural Census he is listed as owning 1400 acres with only 400 of those acres marked as improved, which means he was farming about a third of his land. According to the Agricultural Census, he owned horses, milk cows, sheep and swine and grew wheat, corn, oats, peas and sweet potatoes. He produced no cotton that year, which was unusual because most DeKalb farmers at the time grew at least a small amount of cotton; and we know from a later deed of sale he had a cotton gin. In addition to his livestock and crops, John Bird owned four carriages and had a sawmill thrasher on his property. There were only about 25 sawmills in the entire county at the time.

John Bird's home still stands on River Road and is, according to the current owner, a two-room log cabin at the core that was constructed circa 1830. It is one of the few antebellum homes remaining in DeKalb County and has had many additions and alterations since it was constructed nearly two hundred years ago. Other structures must have been constructed on the farm prior to the Civil War to house the slaves and possibly additional members of the Bird family, but the location and history of those structures along with the mill, gin and thrasher have been lost over the years.

John Bird's daughter, Martha Bird, married Nathaniel G. Hilburn in Franklin County, Georgia in 1834; and by 1840 Martha and Nathaniel lived near her parents in DeKalb County. Her father purchased a home for them in Atlanta on the corner of Decatur and Ivy streets in 1849 where the family lived with 20 boarders including Martha's brother Elijah. Nathaniel practiced dentistry, and Elijah was also recorded as practicing dentistry but may have been a grocer in Atlanta.

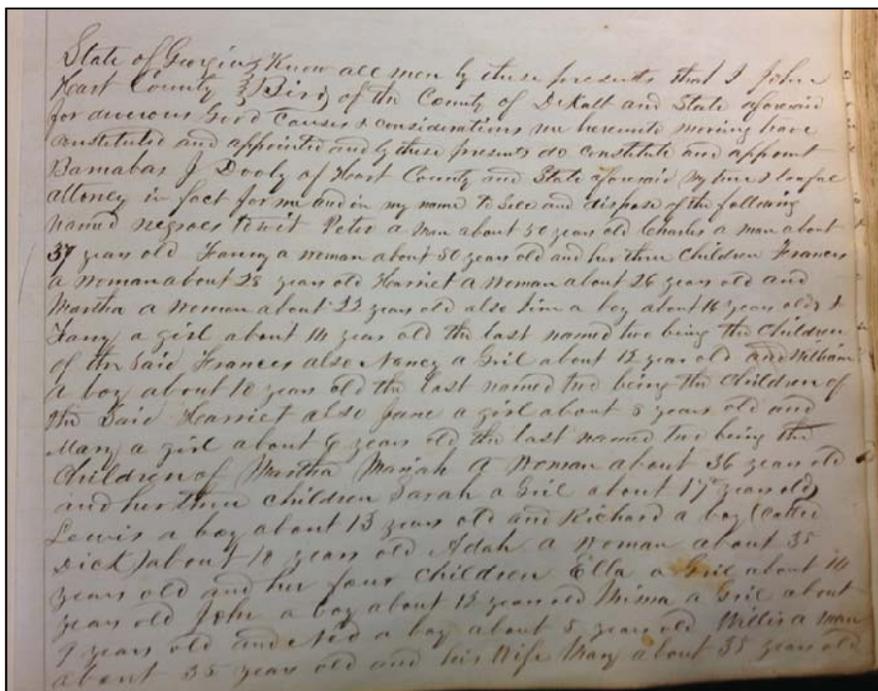
Nathaniel Hilburn did not get along with his wife's family, especially her mother and brother, who he felt meddled in his business. On December 1, 1851 John and Martha Bird took their carriage from their farm on River Road to the Hilburn residence in downtown Atlanta. Mr. Bird went inside the house while his wife waited in the carriage, and after two hours Hilburn rushed out of the house and swung at the carriage with an axe. His daughters and mother-in-law had convinced him to put down the axe when Elijah Bird arrived, who did not get along with his brother-in-law, and stabbed him in the neck. Nathaniel Hilburn died shortly after, and the murder caused uproar because it was one of the first in the newly formed City of Atlanta.

Hilburn's burial site is unknown, but it has been speculated by Bird ancestors that he was buried on John Bird's farm.

Elijah was arrested and indicted in April of 1852 by a DeKalb Grand Jury, and his trial took place the next year under Judge Edward Young Hill. Solicitor General M. M. Tidwell prosecuted; and Elijah Bird hired four prominent attorneys: James Calhoun, Thomas Latham, William Ezzard and Charles Murphy. Despite his panel of attorneys, he was found guilty on April 14, 1853 and sentenced to hang.

The Supreme Court of Georgia upheld the lower court's ruling in an appeal and confirmed the death penalty sentence for Elijah. John Bird would do anything within his means to save his son from hanging and was able to have a pardon for Elijah introduced into the State Legislature. When it came to vote in the Senate, there was a tie; and the President voted for the pardon, thus freeing Elijah Bird. A stipulation of his pardon was that he must leave the state, and he went to Louisiana where he managed a plantation for several years until his untimely death. A hired worker, whom he had trouble with, hit him in the back of the head with a backhoe and killed him.

John Bird was forced to sell off his land to pay his son's legal fees and even levied his estate to Charles Murphy. He first sold off a few land lots he owned throughout the county but by 1858 was forced to sell his farm to pay the overwhelming debt and gave power of attorney to Barnabas Dooly of Hart County to dispose of the property. Elijah's murderer was never caught, and it was a sad ending to a tragic story that nearly ruined the DeKalb family. ✦



Power of Attorney from John Bird to B. Dooly (from our Archives).

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